

THE INVASION

At 8:00 p.m. on June 18 Carlos Castillo Armas' forces crossed the border. Divided into four groups, his roughly 480-strong party invaded at five key points along the Guatemalan-Honduran and the Guatemalan-Salvadoran border. This was done to give the impression of a massive forces invading along a wide front, and also to disperse the men so as to minimize the chance of the entire force being routed in a single unfavorable engagement. In addition to these regular troops, ten trained saboteurs slipped in ahead and were given the task of blowing up key bridges and cutting telegraph lines. All of the invading forces were instructed to minimize actual encounters with the Guatemalan army, for many reasons but most of all to avoid giving reason for the uniting of the army against the invaders. The entire course of the invasion was specifically designed to sow panic and to give the impression of insurmountable odds in order to bring the populace and the military over to its side, rather than defeat them. During the invasion, radio propaganda also assisted towards this end, transmitting false reports of huge forces joining the local populace in a popular revolution.



Almost immediately, Armas's forces met with decisive failure. Invading on foot and hampered by heavy equipment, it was in some cases days before the rebels reached their objectives. This weakened the psychological impact of the initial invasion, as local Guatemalans realized they were in no immediate danger. One of the first groups to reach its objective, the group of 122 rebels whose task it was to capture the city of Zacapa, were severely crushed by a small contingent of 30 Guatemalan army soldiers, leaving only 28 rebels who had escaped death or capture. An even larger defeat was handed to the group of 170 rebels who undertook the task of capturing the

heavily guarded port city of Puerto Barrios. After the police chief spotted the invading force, he quickly armed local dock workers and assigned them defensive roles. In a matter of hours the vast majority of the rebels were killed or captured, with the remaining men fleeing back into Honduras. Within three days, two of Armas's four prongs were out of commission. Attempting to recover momentum, Armas ordered an air attack on the capital the following day. This too failed, as a single slow flying plane managed to bomb a small oil tank, creating a minor fire that was doused in 20 minutes.

After these rebel failures, Arbenz ordered his military commander to allow Armas's forces to advance deep into the country. Arbenz and his chief commander didn't fear Armas' ragtag army, but there was a concern that, were the rebels to be too severely crushed, it would provide a pretext for open American military intervention. This fear spread widely amongst the officer class, with no one wanting to engage and defeat Armas' increasingly decimated force. Rumors spread—fueled greatly by the presence of the American amphibious assault force—that a Honduran landing by US Marines was in progress; preparatory to an invasion of Guatemala. Arbenz feared that the officers would be cowed into striking a deal with Armas. Confirmation of Arbenz' fear came when an entire army garrison surrendered to Armas a few days later in the town of Chiquimula. Arbenz summoned his cabinet to explain that the army was in revolt, and on June 27 Arbenz announced his resignation.

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